

Tribute to 2022 Honoree Anne Kasten
Written by Anne and Rob's daughter Katie Hodak

My mom died 4 months ago. Sometimes, the sadness is crushing. I texted her 10 maybe 20 times a day since my daughter was old enough to do silly things, so that's 10 to 20 times a day that my heart aches a little. For some reason, I didn't realize that speaking at her funeral was me eulogizing her. At the time, I couldn't find any words...things just bubbled around my consciousness. It wasn't until I spoke to my cousin the next day that my thoughts started to filter through and began pouring into what one would consider a proper eulogy. I was on the plane and found a pen in my jacket and Delta's barf bag to write on, so this is entitled "a barf bag eulogy." Here goes...

Life can certainly be absolutely befuddling at times. Although I still cannot find the words to describe the life force of my mom, there are a few things that keep coming into my thoughts. She was unique. She made life rich for those around her. She loved banana flavored laffy taffy. And, she was strong. She was the second of eight children growing up in south St Louis. She was a hell raiser in Catholic school and was always getting in trouble. She started working in high school and once waited on Mic Jager earning a pocket full of multi-colored pills as a tip. She was set up with my dad for a Greek weekend, and when I asked him what he thought of her, he said, "well, I thought she was quite a character." Turns out he was right. My dad and her moved around a lot in their first years of marriage, and it took her 10 years to finally get that mathematics degree. During this time, she thought she had carbon monoxide poisoning from her chevy chevette—feeling nauseous and worn down, but nope, she was pregnant with me. I was born almost 3 months early as a precarious three pounds four ounce premie, but I survived without a hitch. She has since termed that her *milagro*. Four years later, my brother was born as a healthy infant, but as a toddler, my mom noticed that Matthew was sleeping a lot and didn't seem himself. He quickly passed from brain cancer. After my oldest

daughter turned 18 months old (about the age Matt was diagnosed), I remember asking my mom how she could function after losing a child, and she, in a matter of fact Anne kind of way said, "well, I had you to take care of." See, she never bemoaned herself, in fact, I'm not sure most people would have known that she was ever sick or in pain. She was strong as steel which made watching her fade away even more heart breaking. That strong, robust, vivacious "life of the party" rapidly got chiseled away by cancer.

She was really only truly sad in times when someone she loved was sad. It was always sadness for the heartache of others. The first time I saw this was when she told me that my best friend's brother died; I felt her heart drop with mine. Have you ever felt that? When someone's heart drops right in sync with your own? She drove me over to my best friend's house right away and planned on sitting in the car...and ultimately came in. Heartache to heartache. Another distinct memory of our sadness was when my mom and I were loudly and openly bawling in a Chinese restaurant with my new boyfriend at the time, Phil, sandwiched between us after my cousin passed. Her heartache for my aunt and uncle never faded, and this in some way sealed her bond with Theresa in a way like no other. The next time her heart broke with mine was when I was trying to get pregnant. I doubted that it was going to happen, and she was so devastated knowing that I was hurting. Then the reverse of that sadness when I found out I was expecting was absolute, buoyant joy. The last time her heart broke for me was in the beginning of the pandemic when I was truly scared that I was going to die. I was sitting in my car after my nursing shift, in a school parking lot, and I couldn't control myself. Fear was taking the breath out of me. I ran through all the horrible scenarios in my mind (like we all did)...what if I died, what if Phil died, what if we became debilitated, what if my children got sick, what would happen to them, who would they go to, did I have enough life insurance...if you know me, you know how this conversation went... She told me in such an earnest and compassionate way that if something happened to me, I would never have to worry about my kids, that they would be taken care of.

That was enough for the moment; with those words, I could collect myself and drive the remaining 0.2 miles to my house and see my family. She was my safety net.

Being born from a quiet, controlled petrophysicist dad and mathematical, do it yourself kind of mom, I am a true outlier. Being the emotional, liberal, indecisive daughter than I am, we sometimes did not understand each other, but I never once doubted that my mom loved me fiercely. She was opinionated as all hell, creative, artistic, brave, strong, feisty, fun, generous, caring, witty, intelligent, and just plain 'good at everything', but most of all, she loved me—us—we were hers. If you were in her life as a friend, daughter, son, husband, sibling, quilt buddy, neighbor, niece, nephew, grandchild, you were lucky.

My childhood was filled with over the top Halloween costumes (a bunch of grapes, Miss Piggy, Rainbow Bright...you name it), and an epic party for my grade school friends that included a fake coffin, gravestones and dry ice. My mom was the girl scout troop leader who dressed up as the founder of the girl scouts during bridging ceremonies. I had backwards bowling parties, and she would decorate the kitchen on my birthday with streamers and gifts meticulously wrapped in red and white heart paper and fabric bows. She was a dance mom, and she loved to watch me perform. She made costumes, drove to sketchy places to watch me dance, and bought the large size candy bars for my dance friends at recital. I remember walking to school with her in the fog, laughing over and over because we couldn't find the school through the dense sky. She sent me to private school because she knew that's where I would thrive. She drove in an ice storm for 4 hours to get me to that school because I didn't want to miss anything. She would quiz me vocabulary words while driving. She didn't care that I crashed the car, a few times. She and I drove to St Louis once and stopped at every fast food joint along the way to stay awake. She also sped through most states on a different trip to St Louis because when I was little, I refused to pee in a public restroom. She loved the theatre. Anything funky or weird was great. We would see the ballet every year. She made quilts and dollhouses to raise money for scholarships; and she was always generous with her time and creativity. All my teachers

knew her. She drove an hour to a high school parking lot to make sure my car was there and I was safe because I forgot to call my parents to check in. She would throw me signals in cheerleading when we would cheer the wrong thing (D D Defense...when our team was on the offensive). We had yearly camping trips to Colorado where me and my friends would call our parents “distorters” for “exaggerating the truth.” We would belt out the soundtrack of Forest Gump over the truck radios for the entire day it took to get out of Texas. My cousin Ellen recounted that my mom never wasted a minute of time or an opportunity to dress up in some sort of crazy outfit. Even in the middle of a hurricane, my mom and my uncle went out for margarita and pretzel salt.

She took my friends in, specifically Katherine, Shaun and Amanda, as part of the family. Katherine would wake up hours before me, and I would find her baking scones with my mom. Kat recounts that “most of my childhood was spent at (Anne’s) house...climbing loquat trees, rearranging furniture at 2 am, having ‘themed’ Christmas trees, eating tofu smoothies and spring rolls.” My mom made several wedding dresses as well as veils and accessories, including Kat’s hand beaded ballgown. Shaun was the adopted son, sleeping in my room for most of our Senior year. Shaun had a key to my childhood home even when I didn’t. Shaun recounts “...I mean what do you say to the strongest woman you’ve ever met in your life? Who completely helped change the course of your life and supported and criticized constantly in exactly the right way always? Gave you a home when you had none? Nothing I say seems right or enough.” And, Amanda wrote “every moment I spent with Anne or talking to her (was) my favorite moment so I’ll have to narrow it down.” My mom was making a cake with Amanda’s son who ended up coughing right into the mixing bowl, and my mom said “oh look, we’re making chocolate cough-y-cake now.” Amanda continued to say, “she always knew the right thing to say with kids...so many things she’s said and done have changed me. She’s a total rockstar in my eyes.” I used to joke that my friends liked my mom more than me.

In college, my theatre friends remember my mom driving up from Texas to Ohio by herself to come watch me in a play, never missing a show. And, on multiple accounts, my mom was known to order Indian food for the entire table of my friends so we could taste a little bit of everything. In New Jersey, Kara remembers my mom ordering thai food for everyone at the table and always crawling around on the floor with the kids usually wearing something crazy on her head. She was known for rehabbing and redecorating many houses, including the house I live in today. She spent one Thanksgiving, buffing my hardwood floors and painting my cabinets, eating horrible crock pot turkey and stuffing that I prepared. She never quite understood how the rest of us didn't know how to do the things that she did. But, to our credit, we don't think she really knew how she did the things she did. My childhood best friends mom remembers coming to our house in Katy while she was eradicating termites in the living room. She was removing the paneling and treating the area with poison, and when Linda asked why she didn't hire professional exterminators, she said she could do a better job herself. She worked for an HIV+ openly gay psychiatrist in the 80's, and I learned that being different was cool. I learned that it was sacred to have faith in something. I learned that it was okay to laugh uncontrollably at times and sing badly, loudly & often. I learned the music of Chris De Burg, Cher, the Beatles, the Eagles and Tina Turner. I learned that the priest did not say "wash away my nitty gritties" in Mass or that peace is "setting all the cactus free." I learned that she was so nervous about me living in Central America that she fell down the stairs trying to answer the phone in case it was me calling. And...I also learned that it was never okay to let someone hurt or abuse you, and that my parents would rather sacrifice everything than let the world hurt me.

My mom told me about her cancer diagnosis about 16 years ago by saying "so the funny thing is that I have breast cancer." She argued with the insurance company to have both breasts removed for two reasons. First of all, she said that all the scans never picked up the cancer in the confirmed cancer boob, so what's to say that there wasn't cancer hiding in the other boob...and she, of course, was right. Secondly, she asked the

surgeon if she only took one breast would she really be able to “recreate *this* masterpiece” pointing to her healthy breast, a double D in it’s 50’s. Always with a sense of humor. Her golf friends marched up the driveway in bald caps to shave her clumps of hair during her first bouts of chemo. They’ve since recalled how they still laugh at the fact that she could continue to tell a story while swinging a golf club without even taking pause. She had lots of great friends, friends that knew her and “got” her.

She was not one to feel sorry for herself. Not ever. Even way back during her first run with cancer, she was annoyed that I flew down for her mastectomy. “Kate, there’s nothing for you to do here.” She was right. I mean, she was always right. She was in remission from HR+ HER2- lobular stage 3 breast cancer for over 15 years. It wasn’t until a year ago that she broke her clavicle bone turning over in bed and lost all energy that we discovered it had metastasized to her bones, significantly. In her words, “the PET scan lit up like a christmas tree.” Last March, we thought it was over. She could barely walk from one chair to the next. But, we were wrong. She was a freaking phoenix. Her PET scan in May indicated the bone cancer was practically squelched. We knew it wasn’t a cure but geez. She graduated to oral chemo with occasional IV chemo maintenance. And those last 9 months were amazing. She had an incredible summer and fall, enjoying her friends, family and neighbors, perhaps like never before. We visited her in Arkansas, arriving to a giant bounce house hoisted up in the front yard. We had a great visit; I cried as we left, and she said, “Kate, it’s okay, I’m really not going anywhere.” My dad and her then drove 20+ hours a few weeks later to surprise Cici for her birthday since she had a week off chemo. She had cherished boat rides and late night chats with good friends. I heard about perfect sunsets, hikes on the bluff and cocktails. She got to see her mom really enjoy the lake house. She spoke to friends (including my friends) that she hadn’t spoke with in a while. I heard her say things like “aside from the moment we are born, we aren’t guaranteed another day.” She prayed to Padre Pia. She told me not to worry about things. She auditioned for musicals. She poured her energy into being on stage in Mamma Mia as the debutant, gold digger, Tanya. Dad, Theresa, Jim, Mitch,

myself and so many friends got to sit in the audience to support her for once. My cousin said it so perfectly, she was living on borrowed time.

It was just before New Year's that she started to feel pain in her stomach and nausea, and she got the news that the cancer had spread to her liver on a Tuesday. This was her text to me: "Pet scan shows my liver is involved. Switching back to infusion chemo on Thursday, no ultrasound since finding would be redundant. Dr Webb seemed sadder than us. He hopes the response is as quick as last time, I'll know Thursday what goodies I get pumped with. I know not good news but looking back on a great year and hopeful for another good response leaves me hopeful and happy. Love you." By Thursday, she was getting her "breakfast" as she texted me...a new dose of chemo. I told her it was a "shit breakfast." She laughed. She agreed to schedule a liver biopsy the following Friday to determine if there were any specific treatments available. She was a realist, and she was so smart, but I think the speed of this cancer took even her by surprise. There was never any gravitas. My last face time with her ended in me leaving because my 3 year old was clutching her butt and screaming, and laughingly she said that "I should go take care of that." I worked all weekend, and by that next Tuesday, she was in no condition to talk. I suppose we all could have guessed that this third round of cancer could have been the last, but all I can say is that I didn't. My mom was suppose to live forever. But that was not reality. The reality was that the strong chemo on Tuesday likely retracted tumors lining her stomach, causing a perforation that was painful and sudden. There was no way of suspecting how aggressive the cancer had been. The surgeon addressed the immediate perforation on Friday, but he knew she would never leave the hospital. The cancer had virtually consumed her liver and peritoneum entirely. We (and she) did not know that at the time, and probably for the best. The Sunday before she died, I heard her hoarsely say, "tell Kate it's not the time." She meant it wasn't time for me to come and say goodbye. For a multitude of reasons, she was not ready to go—to be still—to slow down. Maybe that's the blessing in this—she would have never wanted to slow down.

The hardest part of watching her fall still was watching my dad's heart break multiple times a day. The other hardest part was knowing that my kids deserve so much more of a grand mommy like her. She was magnetic. She would be playing with my kids at an outdoor beach concert, and we'd turn around to find five other kids dancing with her. She enjoyed my girls so much it hurts. I look back at those last texts, those last trips, and I remember things like shutting the blinds at my house to watch the NYC ballet's Nutcracker and dancing and spinning with my girls, me and my mom lifting them over our heads as they did "ballerina" things. I remember the tea parties and dress up and whip cream and hair dye and playing hide and seek and forcing my parents to go to the zoo & the nature reserve for the 10th time.

I look back at those precious last few months, and I think...was it good enough? I could destroy myself by asking if we saw each other enough or this or that...but ultimately, it was enough because it has to be. So, I showed up that sleepless Tuesday morning and saw her lying in the hospital bed—NG tube, oxygen, drains, IVs, monitors. I said "hey, mom, do you know who I am?" Head nods. "Is it okay that I'm here?" Head nods. I'm now crying; I know what is happening; my mom is dying. The nurse asks, "Who is this?" My mom hoarsely whispers, "Kate, my daughter." I've never heard more beautiful words. Over the next four days, I asked her so many times in the hospital if she knew that she was loved, and she adamantly nodded yes every time. The day she died, we had seen both the surgeon and her oncologist. Her oncologist walked in the door with welled up tears; I gave him a hug and thanked him for those last really good 9 months. I thanked him for sending my parents into the hospital on Friday so that I could get to say goodbye. He said he will always remember mom's "positive thinking" as he pointed to those words on her chemo blanket laying on her lap. After I belabored and confirmed (yet again) exactly where the cancer spread and how aggressive and insidious it had been, dad and I felt a bit more resolve. There was nothing wrong with having been hopeful, there was no way of knowing how extensive the cancer was, and now there was just sadness. Her strong and amazing spirit had a beautiful send off. We prayed, we listened to music, we sat together, we reminisced. She

wasn't alone, she was in our arms then and in your hearts now, and she will stay that way forever. It is my hope that she is gabbing away, eating Italian cream cake and taffy, hitting holes in 1, quilting the authentic beauty of the world and knowing that she was loved fiercely...as much as she fiercely loved.